

Why Not Try Plot?

GROWTH OF A MAN. By Mazo de la Roche. Boston: Little, Brown and Co. 1938. \$2.50.

Reviewed by HOWARD MUMFORD JONES

MISS DE LA ROCHE'S new novel is an example of the heavy price which fiction paid when, under the influence of naturalism, it threw plot out of the window. The argument for omitting plot, considered as a formal and predetermined arrangement of events, was that in actual life events do not fall into neat patterns. But when plot in this sense disappeared, the novelist was forced back upon the curve-of-a-life pattern, whether this curve took the form of fictional biography or whether it became that internal monologue known as stream of consciousness. In the hands of masterful writers and with great good luck, the curve-of-a-life pattern has proved capable of enduring results, but because it compels the writer to stake everything on a single throw of the dice, the failure of the formula, when it breaks down, is complete.

"Growth of a Man"—unconnected with the *Jalna* novels—follows the curve-of-a-life pattern, and unfortunately it does not come off. Dogged industry gets us through the biography of Shaw Manifold, from the time his mother leaves him as a small boy to the dubious mercies of his grandparents and their children on a Canadian farm, to the day when we see him sailing from San Francisco on a world tour in the interests of forestry. The novel has a sort of honesty, but the honesty does not compensate for the monotonous pound of the story, written without humor, without color, and without charm.

The book is devoted to proof of the aged maxim: Slow rises worth by poverty depress'd. This theme can be made interesting only by a fresh approach, a novel personality, or a new turn in the drama. Miss de la Roche gives us none of these things. We are to suppose the hero is blessed with talent, but the novelist does not convince us that he is talented. Yet the hero is the story. Because he is not vital himself, he cannot shed vitality upon the secondary characters who wander across his path. With the exception of Grandfather Gower, and not excepting his mother, they remain shadows. Were the hero engaged in a real instead of a formal conflict, these people might fall into place. The struggle against poverty and illness, however, is not in itself capable of significant variations unless situation, personage, and personal tension are brought into dramatic conflict with the real desires of the hero, and it is precisely because there is no real

dramatic relation between the hero and the other characters that the book fails.

Contrast "David Copperfield." When we have made every allowance for sentimentality, for Victorian melodrama, there still remains a dramatic instead of a static relation between David and the other characters. The question whether he will or will not be released from the custody of the Murdstones is a dramatic question. The problem of his relation to Emily and Steerforth is, if one likes, a theatrical problem, but it is also a dynamic and not a static relationship. The result is a fictional masterpiece, not by reason of the shoddy plot in which Mr. Micawber uncovers the villainies of Uriah Heep, but because of the excellent plot by which David during his rise in life is continually thrust into fresh dramatic situations, situations, that is, involving real and soluble conflicts.

Miss de la Roche's hero struggles, but he does not struggle dramatically. He dislikes the tyranny of his grandparents, but his rebellion is only inward. He resolves to succeed in school, but the rivalry is narrated, not dramatized. A girl visits

him nightly in his room in a college boarding house, but her visits are no more exciting than the postman's. He survives two sanatoria for tuberculosis patients, suffers a good deal in mind and spirit, and witnesses a good deal of suffering, but except for the loss of time and the thwarting of his vague ambition, no dramatic consequences hang upon the outcome. The moral result of his experiences is set down on page 378, but the ending is didactic, not dramatic.

Granted that the Victorian novel too often borrowed the false trappings of the theater, granted also that great books have been written on the curve-of-a-life pattern, may not one legitimately ask our novelists to ponder once more the problem of formal plot? The modern novel has so lost form, has experimented so wildly, that no human being can say what a novel is. But the primary business of fiction is what it has always been: to tell a good story; and when dramatic conflict is deliberately omitted from fiction, the story suffers and dies. A very great writer may indeed compel us to follow him admiringly in whatever he does, as examples from Sterne to Joyce can be cited to prove. But few of us are very great writers. If it is a high and difficult achievement to write good fiction on the curve-of-a-life pattern, it is no defence for spineless fiction that truth to life compels the dropping of dramatic pattern. The revolution in the novel won by realism was in its way a necessary reform, but the victory is won, and it is time to consider what was lost as well as what was gained in that conflict.



Mazo de la Roche

The Making of a King

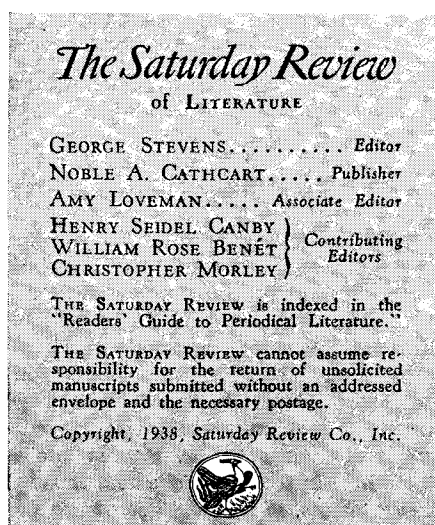
CRIPPLED SPLENDOR. By Evan John. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. 1938. \$2.50.

Reviewed by CHARLES DAVID ABBOTT

THE first royal Stewart to be called James was the greatest of his line. For three centuries his direct descendants were stars in the pageant of European history; several had remarkable gifts, nearly all possessed something of his magnetism, a few inherited or acquired the noble manliness which was the hallmark of their ancestor. But no one of them held in the same delicate balance so many talents, so rich and generous a nature, so much essential kingliness. "Companion-in-arms to Henry the Fifth, prisoner, poet, musician, soldier, law-giver, lover, and king," Mr. John calls him in the dedication of this novel, and adds, "of whose strange life and terrible death the tale is here retold."

It is a tale well worth many retellings, none of which is likely to surpass this one in warmth of manner, breadth of understanding, historical accuracy (in spirit if not in detail), or plain narrative skill. It is a genuinely moving book, quiet and dignified in its gradual development of the king's character and of the Scottish, British, and French backgrounds before which the drama of his life was enacted, growing in excitement until it reaches the unspeakable tenseness of that last night in Perth, where the desperate stubbornness of feudal Scotland slew its prince and temporarily brought to an end the civilizing forces which he was directing. That final scene is Mr. John's triumph.

The book has other merits which ought to be commended. The minor characters, for example, are brilliantly depicted, with brevity and without the usual irrelevancies of anecdote. Charles of Orleans, Cardinal Beaufort, the Earl of Mar, not to mention Henry the Fifth and his Queen Katherine, are models of compact delineation. The social and economic aspects of fifteenth-century Europe are explained without taint of pedantry. Post-Chaucerian poetry and, of course, the "King's Quair" in particular, are made to heighten rather than interrupt the narrative. But the spotlight is always and rightly on James himself. Here it is that Mr. John has done his superlatively good job. He has kept us aware of what is going on in James's mind continuously, through the interminable years of his English imprisonment, through that long adolescence and early manhood when he lived on hope alone and so nearly despaired of ever gaining his freedom, when he saw Joan Beaufort in the garden at Windsor and began the singing of his inspired poem. He had many years to be a man before he was a king, but when release comes and the duties of sovereignty with it, then the king develops out of the man.



Reading Time, One Minute

IN *The Scientific Monthly* recently, and in *The Reader's Digest* currently, there appears an article by William Burnett Benton, Vice-President of the University of Chicago, on developing speed in reading. The author describes two machines now in operation at the University, "by which our faulty [reading] habits may be diagnosed and cured." These machines train the "patient" to cover a line of type in three or four eye-jumps instead of six or eight, to take in a phrase at each glance, instead of only a word or two. One of these machines is a simple projector, which "flashes a story on the screen, not a word at a time, not a line at a time, but a phrase at a time." At first, the machine projects about "200 words a minute for half an hour. The next day the speed goes up to 225 or even 250. After 20 or 30 lessons a story is being run off at 650 words a minute for those who make the most progress."

Undoubtedly there are many readers who will profit by the development of efficient reading habits; undoubtedly many of us are slovenly readers who have much to learn from the efficiency expert. For students, for busy people who genuinely have too little time to read, for those who are obliged to cover a certain number of pages to dig out essential information, it is necessary to learn how to skim. (Reading at the rate of 650 words a minute is skimming for most of us.) The trouble with efficiency in reading, as of efficiency in everything else, is that it tends to become an end in itself. It can easily be overdone, particularly in reading that is undertaken for pleasure—either for relaxation and entertainment, or for the subtler pleasure of esthetic experience.

Any one with training as a book reviewer is qualified to offer a few remarks on efficiency in reading. According to some published observations, a rapid reviewer can cover 150 pages of an ordinary novel in an hour: that comes to 750 words a minute. He can do this without

missing anything essential, except in those cases, unfortunately rare, where style is essential, where emotions and thoughts are subtly implicit, where there is poetry between the lines of prose. In these cases a good reviewer does not read at the rate of 750 words a minute: no one, for instance, pretends to read Thomas Mann at that speed. Even those readers who cover six to ten books a week will inevitably slow down, once they begin to enjoy themselves.

The fact is that as soon as a book begins to get under your skin, you will automatically become oblivious of the passage of time and the rate of speed at which you are reading. This is true whether you are reading "The Magic Mountain" or "The Code of the Woosters," "Men of Good Will" or the latest Nero Wolfe novel. Moreover, it is in general true that the faster you read, the more quickly you forget what you have read. Impressions from rapid reading may be vivid, but if they are not given time to sink in, they remain on the surface of the mind and quickly evaporate. The same thing is true in non-fiction. Every one has had the experience of cramming for an examination, and forgetting everything in the text book once the examination is over.

Mr. Benton's article does, to be sure, give warning against too much efficiency in reading speed. "Mere improvement in one's technique of reading is no guarantee that a person will have a richer, more meaningful reading experience," he writes. "Pausing to reflect on what we've read is one of the most valuable parts of the educational process. But as anyone can see, that's quite another matter from reading laboriously and inefficiently." That, however, is not all there is to be said. Reading speed is a convenience which can be developed by practice, but it should be developed on practice material—that is, on second-rate or inessential reading matter; and it is useful in so far as it becomes a habit—that is, an ability exercised unconsciously. Books, real books, are not meant to be read with an eye on the clock. You can train yourself to read Henry Adams's "Mont Saint Michel and Chartres" at the rate of six to seven hundred words a minute, just as you can race through Mont Saint Michel itself in half an hour or the Chartres Cathedral in fifteen minutes. And what are you going to do with all the time you save? Read guidebooks?

Reading Time, 24 Hours

If readers generally trained themselves to read twice as fast, would they accordingly read twice as much? Would efficient reading habits increase the consumption of books? On the face of it, yes; and there are publishers, librarians, and educators who regard the matter as an important one. In the words of the Cheney Report on the book industry seven years ago, "books are cannibals." They are in com-

petition for reading time. A reader who takes six hours to read a 300-page novel is automatically out of the book market for two evenings. If he doubled his speed, he could read a novel every evening.

These considerations seem to us entirely artificial. The real question is, not how quickly the customer reads, but how much he enjoys what he reads. Induce him to speed up his reading mechanically, and the chances are that he will use that extra evening to go to the movies. Give him something he enjoys reading, enjoys so much that he has no room in his mind to consider the time it takes, and he will come back for more.

In this connection a very practical point can be raised, and one on which publishers can exercise a direct influence. Most books are too long. A familiar story which went the rounds of the book business in its day concerned a copy of a long novel on the shelf of a rental library. (The story is probably legend, since different versions identified the novel variously as "Anthony Adverse" and "Of Time and the River," but its allegorical truth is unimpeachable.) Anyhow, this copy was rented out to seventeen different customers before one of them noticed that a 32-page signature, somewhere after page 500, had been dropped out in the bindery. This is not necessarily to say that "Anthony Adverse" or "Of Time and the River" is too long—it may have been some other novel. But many ordinary, second-rate novels are too long. They run 400, 500, even 600 pages when they could easily say all they have to say in the standard 288. Many second-rate novels have qualities that make them worth publishing and worth reading, but too few of them have qualities that justify their length. This department has read at least a dozen in 1938 which attempt to build up an impression of solidity through mere prolixity and the exercise of total recall. Authors of second-rate non-fiction labor under the same disability. In other words, as has been pointed out in every critical quarter, long books, particularly long novels, have become a fashion.

If publishers want readers to read two books in the place of one, their most direct approach to the problem is in the influence they might exercise on authors to cut out inessentials—to cut out overwriting, to condense long descriptions and dialogues which are second-hand in effect, to eliminate verbosity. Not all long novels are too long; it depends on how good they are; "The Magic Mountain" is not too long, nor is "Men of Good Will." But a novel which is only promising, or only pretty good, has no excuse for trying to look monumental. Readers would cheerfully take two pretty good 300-page novels in place of one pretty good 600-page novel. And where they do take the 600-page novel, they often find that they are developing their reading efficiency beyond skimming to skipping.